

CHAPTER ONE

The Assignment

By the time Nora reached the river, she had thought of three excellent replies to her history teacher. Unfortunately, all three would have been more useful an hour earlier.

She stopped beneath the awning of a closed flower stall and opened her exercise book.

Interesting observations. Now use them to answer the question.

Below the comment, her drawing of an Egyptian irrigation channel had received a tick. The paragraph beside it had received a question mark. She had spent longer on the paragraph.

Across the Thames, the windows of the flood gardens were turning gold. A maintenance cradle crept down the side of a tower, pausing wherever the climbing plants had pushed through their supports. Beneath it, an old brick warehouse sat between two newer buildings, with a tree growing out of what had once been its chimney. Nora had drawn it last week. She liked the awkward places where London had failed to fit together neatly.

Her wrist screen brightened.

Your usual route is clear.

She took the steps to the lower walkway instead. There was something unfinished beneath the bridge that she wanted to look at.

A little farther on, a delivery trolley had become wedged between a bollard and a discarded bicycle. It requested assistance in an extremely reasonable voice. People stepped round it. Nora pulled the bicycle backwards until the trolley rolled free, then watched it continue towards the steps.

'That's not going to help,' she told it.

It thanked her and stopped at the top.

She shut her exercise book. At least something else was having trouble with the question.

At home, Dad was standing over a pan with a wooden spoon in one hand and a book in the other. The kitchen window was open. Warm air carried the smell of onions out towards the small courtyard, where Mum's workshop occupied almost everything that was not a drain or a plant pot.

'Shoes,' Dad said without looking round.

Nora backed up, took them off and dropped her bag beside the table.

'How was school?'

'Augustus.'

Dad put down the book. 'Ah.'

'You don't even know what I'm going to say.'

'I can make a fairly strong prediction.'

She slid the new assignment across the table.

How did Rome change under Augustus, and who benefited?

'First Roman emperor,' she said. 'Built things. Won things. Had statues of himself put everywhere. Fifteen hundred words, in my own handwriting, by Monday.'

She stretched the fingers of her writing hand. In 2126, a machine could compose a respectable essay before you had finished asking for it. Schools had responded to AI plagiarism by making all schoolwork handwritten. Nora's history folder consequently weighed more than her father's entire digital library.

Dad read the sheet while stirring the pan. 'It doesn't ask you to list what he built.'

'I know. It asks who benefited. Romans.'

'All of them?'

She pulled out a chair with rather more force than necessary.

Dad turned the heat down.

'Sorry,' he said. 'You have already had a teacher today.'

Nora sat. That made it harder to stay annoyed with him, which was annoying in itself.

She showed him the earlier exercise. He looked at the channel drawing, then at the paragraph and the question mark. She waited for him to tell her how good the drawing was.

'You found something worth noticing,' he said. 'I think she wants to know what you make of it.'

'What I make of it is a page with a question mark on it.'

'Yes. I can see that.'

He went back to the cooker, giving her enough time to wish she had answered differently.

Nora drew Augustus in the corner of the assignment sheet. She gave him the smooth, determined profile she remembered from the classroom display.

Underneath she wrote: *Successfully became important.*

Dad glanced over her shoulder.

'Reasonable opening. Difficult to sustain for fifteen hundred words.'

She almost smiled.

'I don't see what I'm supposed to discover. It's already happened. Everyone already knows.'

'We know some of it.' He tasted the dhal, considered it and reached for the salt.

'There are whole lives we barely hear about. What people complained about at breakfast. Which streets they avoided. What it sounded like when—'

'Dad.'

He lowered the spoon.

'You were going to tell me for a very long time.'

'I was going to offer you a taste.'

She took it. The lentils were hot enough to hurt. Dad waited, visibly trying not to look pleased when she reached for another spoonful.

Outside, something struck the workshop door.

They both looked up.

There was a second sound: a scrape, followed by Mum saying something sharp in Bangla. Then the door opened and she came across the courtyard carrying a sealed transparent box against her chest.

Nora stood so quickly that her chair hit the wall.

Mum had been working on the machine for years. It had swallowed weekends and covered the dining table with calculations. Nora knew the face Mum wore when a test had nearly worked, and the much quieter face she wore when it had not. This was neither.

'Turn that off,' Mum said to Dad.

He switched off the hob.

She put the box on the table. Inside lay the little survey drone, its four folded legs tucked under its body. A smear of dark material marked one side of its casing.

'It came back,' Mum said.

Nora looked from the drone to her.

'From where?'

Mum tried to answer. Instead, she let out a laugh that broke in the middle. Dad moved round the table and took her free hand.

She squeezed it, then reached for her tablet.

The kitchen wall cleared. The family calendar and a message from Nora's cousins in Bangladesh disappeared. For a moment there was only grey.

Then leaves filled the wall.

They were wet and enormous, stirring above a floor of ferns. Beyond them lay a strip of muddy water. Mist hung over it. The image trembled as the drone lifted, and the view opened on a broad, low valley.

Something moved among the trees.

At first Nora could not understand its size. A branch bent sideways; a long neck rose behind it. The animal brought its head round, trailing leaves from its mouth. Farther back, another body shifted, grey-brown against the green, so large that Nora had mistaken part of it for the ground.

Nobody spoke.

The first animal stepped into the shallows. Water bulged round its leg. A string of droplets struck the surface, each one briefly bright.

Nora moved closer to the wall. She was aware of Dad breathing beside her and the cooling pan behind them. Those things seemed to belong at an impossible distance from what she was seeing.

'Is that really—?'

'Yes,' Mum said.

The drone turned. For an instant its own shadow travelled over the mud. The image tilted and vanished.

Their calendar returned.

Saturday: groceries. Sunday: finish homework.

Nora stared at it.

'Put it back.'

Mum did.

They watched the animal wade into the water again. This time Nora noticed a smaller shape behind it, almost hidden by the larger body. She pointed, and Mum paused the recording.

'I hadn't seen that,' Mum said.

Nora looked at her. 'You hadn't?'

'I was watching the return readings.'

Dad bent over the sealed box. He did not touch it.

'The whole journey?'

Mum nodded. 'Out, a full survey interval, back to the marked position. Both independent clocks recorded it. The home system kept its record separately.'

'And the return time?'

'Inside the predicted range.'

Dad shut his eyes for a moment. When he opened them he was smiling, but not in the way he smiled at Nora's jokes.

Nora reached for Mum's hand. There was a small raw patch beside her thumbnail, where she had been worrying at it. Her fingers felt cold.

'You did it,' Nora said.

Mum looked down at their hands.

'Alhamdulillah,' she said softly.

For a little while they stood round a kitchen table and watched animals that had been dead for millions of years drink from a river.

It was Dad who remembered dinner.

They ate with the image still on the wall. Nora kept twisting in her chair to see it. Once Mum raised a spoon to her mouth and forgot what she was doing. A lentil landed on her sleeve.

'Can people go?' Nora asked.

Mum set the spoon down.

'The short crossings have passed their checks. This was the first complete deep-time journey with the survey package. Before anyone takes a long trip, there are more checks to do.'

'But can they?'

'Yes.'

Nora could not keep still. 'Could we?'

Dad looked at Mum, then at the assignment sheet beneath Nora's elbow.

'Rome,' he said.

Mum's eyes moved to him.

'Tomorrow,' he added.

Nora stopped moving.

'You mean actual Rome?'

'That would be my preference.'

'When?'





He took the sheet, careful not to put his fingers in the dhal. 'During Augustus's reign. Eighteen BCE, perhaps. The new aqueduct would be working. Agrippa would—'

He broke off. Nora watched him realise that he might finish this sentence in a different way from any he had ever used before.

'We could see it,' he said.

Mum leaned back. Through the open window came the faint rattling of the workshop's cooling fan.

'An identifiable period,' she said. 'Somewhere we can check the date independently. Conditions we can live in. And more than a few minutes of observations.'

'How many minutes?' Nora asked.

'I would like several days, at least. Repeated readings, different conditions. Then I can compare the travelling records with the station's when we get back.'

'We can't miss school on Monday.'

She resented herself for saying it. Dad had suggested visiting ancient Rome and she had responded like a timetable.

Mum drew the assignment towards her and turned it over. On the back she made two marks, then a third well below them.

'We leave on Saturday. Before we leave, we set the home end of the return for Sunday evening. We might spend ten days in Rome. We would live all ten of them. But the journey home connects to the Sunday we set.'

Nora considered that.

'So I could have ten days to do my homework.'

'You could,' Dad said. 'Though it would be an elaborate way of avoiding fifteen hundred words.'

'And if I forgot something, could we go back to before we left?'

'No,' Mum said. 'We don't enter a part of our own journey we've already lived. The machine won't let us set that route. No going back to improve an answer.'

Nora thought of the history lesson and her three replies.

'Fine.'

Mum looked at both of them. 'This is a possibility, not a promise. I need to test the destination. We need the short human crossings with one of us at the controls. We all need to know how to come home. If anything is wrong, we wait.'

Dad nodded at once.

Nora nodded too. It was harder than she had expected. Now that Rome had become a place they might go tomorrow, staying in London felt like losing something she had not known she possessed.

After dinner, Dad cleared the plates. Mum went back to the workshop. Nora sat with her notebook while their voices travelled through the open door: a question, an answer, a pause while something was checked again.

She tried to draw the dinosaur, but its leg kept looking like a tree trunk. She started on the smaller one instead. Around it she wrote questions. How old was it? Had the drone frightened it? What did that valley smell like?

Later, Dad called her into the workshop. The machine stood inside a wide metal frame, much less impressive than the pictures on the kitchen wall. There were handles, indicator lights and a floor marked with three places to stand. Mum made Nora practise using the return control while the machine was off. Then she made Dad do it.

He got the sequence right and stood aside without a joke.

On her way to bed, Nora stopped at the kitchen table. Augustus still occupied the corner of the assignment sheet. Mum's three pencil marks showed through from the other side.

Nora added a question beside the emperor's head.

What would I notice if I were there?

She left the book open, ready for the morning.